



The Powell Memo and the Teaching Machines of Right-Wing Extremists

by: Henry A. Giroux, *t r u t h o u t* | Perspective



(Photo Illustration: Ionia K. / Truthout)

Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, echoing the feelings of many progressives, recently wrote in *The New York Times* about how dismayed he was over the success right-wing ideologues have had not only in undercutting Obama's health care bill, but also in mobilizing enormous public support against almost any reform aimed at rolling back the economic, political, and social conditions that have created the economic recession and the legacy of enormous suffering and hardship for millions of Americans over the last 30 years.[1] Krugman is somewhat astonished that after almost three decades the political scene is still under the sway of what he calls the "zombie doctrine of Reaganism," - the notion that any action by government is bad, except when it benefits corporations and the rich. Clearly, for Krugman, zombie Reaganism appears once again to be shaping policies under the Obama regime. And yet, not only did Reaganism with its hatred of the social state, celebration of unbridled self-interest, its endless quest to privatize everything, and support for deregulation of the economic system eventually bring the country to near economic collapse, it also produced enormous suffering for those who never benefited from the excesses of the second Gilded Age, especially workers, the poor,

disadvantaged minorities and eventually large segments of the middle class. And yet, zombie market politics is back rejecting the public option in Obama's health plan, fighting efforts to strengthen bank regulations, resisting caps on CEO bonuses, preventing climate-control legislation, and refusing to limit military spending. Unlike other pundits, Krugman does not merely puzzle over how zombie politics can keep turning up on the political scene - a return not unlike the endless corpses who keep coming back to life in George Romero's 1968 classic film, "Night of the Living Dead" (think of Bill Kristol who seems to be wrong about everything but just keeps coming back). For Krugman, a wacky and discredited right-wing politics is far from dead and, in fact, one of the great challenges of the current moment is to try to understand the conditions that allow it to once again shape American politics and culture, given the enormous problems it has produced at all levels of American society, including the current recession.

Part of the answer to the enduring quality of such a destructive politics can be found in the lethal combination of money, power and education that the right wing has had a stranglehold on since the early 1970's and how it has used its influence to develop an institutional infrastructure and ideological apparatus to produce its own intellectuals, disseminate ideas, and eventually control most of the commanding heights and institutions in which knowledge is produced, circulated and legitimated. This is not simply a story about the rise of mean-spirited buffoons such as Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly and Michael Savage. Nor is it simply a story about the loss of language, a growing anti-intellectualism in the larger culture, or the spread of what some have called a new illiteracy endlessly being produced in popular culture. As important as these tendencies are, there is something more at stake here which points to a combination of power, money and education in the service of creating an almost lethal restriction of what can be heard, said, learned and debated in the public sphere. And one starting point for understanding this problem is what has been called the Powell Memo, released on August 23, 1971, and written by Lewis F. Powell, who would later be appointed as a member of the Supreme Court of the United States. Powell sent the memo to the US Chamber of Commerce with the title "Attack on the American Free Enterprise System."

The memo is important because it reveals the power that conservatives attributed to the political nature of education and the significance this view

had in shaping the long-term strategy they put into place in the 1960's and 1970's to win an ideological war against liberal intellectuals, who argued for holding government and corporate power accountable as a precondition for extending and expanding the promise of an inclusive democracy. The current concerted assault on government and any other institutions not dominated by free-market principles represents the high point of a fifty-year strategy that was first put into place by conservative ideologues such as Frank Chodorov, founder of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute; publisher and author William F. Buckley; former Nixon Treasury Secretary William Simon, and Michael Joyce, the former head of both the Olin Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The Powell Memo is important because it is the most succinct statement, if not the founding document, for establishing a theoretical framework and political blueprint for the current assault on any vestige of democratic public life that does not subordinate itself to the logic of the alleged free market.

Initially, Powell identified the American college campus "as the single most dynamic source" for producing and housing intellectuals "who are unsympathetic to the [free] enterprise system."^[2] He was particularly concerned about the lack of conservatives on social sciences faculties and urged his supporters to use an appeal to academic freedom as an opportunity to argue for "political balance" on university campuses. Powell recognized that one crucial strategy in changing the political composition of higher education was to convince university administrators and boards of trustees that the most fundamental problem facing universities was "the imbalance of many faculties."^[3] Powell insisted that "the basic concepts of balance, fairness and truth are difficult to resist, if properly presented to boards of trustees, by writing and speaking, and by appeals to alumni associations and groups."^[4] But Powell was not merely concerned about what he perceived as the need to enlist higher education as a bastion of conservative, free market ideology. The Powell Memo was designed to develop a broad-based strategy not only to counter dissent, but also to develop a material and ideological infrastructure with the capability to transform the American public consciousness through a conservative pedagogical commitment to reproduce the knowledge, values, ideology and social relations of the corporate state. For Powell, the war against liberalism and a substantive democracy was primarily a pedagogical and political struggle designed both to win the hearts and minds of the general public and to build a power base capable of

eliminating those public spaces, spheres and institutions that nourish and sustain what Samuel Huntington would later call (in a 1975 study on the "governability of democracies" by the Trilateral Commission) an "excess of democracy."^[5] Central to such efforts was Powell's insistence that conservatives nourish a new generation of scholars who would inhabit the university and function as public intellectuals actively shaping the direction of policy issues. He also advocated the creation of a conservative speakers bureau, staffed by scholars capable of evaluating "textbooks, especially in economics, political science and sociology."^[6] In addition, he advocated organizing a corps of conservative public intellectuals who would monitor the dominant media, publish their own scholarly journals, books and pamphlets, and invest in advertising campaigns to enlighten the American people on conservative issues and policies. The Powell Memo, while not the only influence, played an important role in convincing a "cadre of ultraconservative and self-mythologizing millionaires bent on rescuing the country from the hideous grasp of Satanic liberalism"^[7] to match their ideological fervor with their pocketbooks by "disbursing the collective sum of roughly \$3 billion over a period of thirty years in order to build a network of public intellectuals, think tanks, advocacy groups, foundations, media outlets, and powerful lobbying interests."^[8] As Dave Johnson points out, the initial effort was slow but effective:

In 1973, in response to the Powell Memo, Joseph Coors and Christian-right leader Paul Weyrich founded the Heritage Foundation. Coors told Lee Edwards, historian of the Heritage Foundation, that the Powell Memo persuaded him that American business was "ignoring a crisis." In response, Coors decided to help provide the seed funding for the creation of what was to become the Heritage Foundation, giving \$250,000. Subsequently, the Olin Foundation, under the direction of its president, former Treasury Secretary William Simon (author of the influential 1979 book "A Time for Truth"), began funding similar organizations in concert with "the Four Sisters" - Richard Mellon Scaife's various foundations, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Olin Foundation and the Smith Richardson Foundation - along with Coors's foundations, foundations associated with the Koch oil family, and a group of large corporations^[9].

The most powerful members of this group were Joseph Coors in Denver, Richard Mellon Scaife in Pittsburgh, John Olin in New York City, David and Charles Koch in Wichita, the Smith Richardson family in North Carolina, and Harry Bradley in Milwaukee - all of whom agreed to finance a number of right-wing think tanks, which over the past thirty years have come to include the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Koch Foundation, the Castle Rock Foundation and the Sarah Scaife Foundation. This formidable alliance of far-right-wing foundations deployed their resources in building and strategically linking "an impressive array of almost 500 think tanks, centers, institutes and concerned citizens groups both within and outside of the academy.... A small sampling of these entities includes the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Manhattan Institute, the Hoover Institution, the Claremont Institute, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, [the] Middle East Forum, Accuracy in Media, and the National Association of Scholars, as well as [David] Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture." [10]

For several decades, right-wing extremists have labored to put into place an ultra-conservative re-education machine - an apparatus for producing and disseminating a public pedagogy in which everything tainted with the stamp of liberal origin and the word "public" would be contested and destroyed. Commenting on the rise of this vast right-wing propaganda machine organized to promote the ideal that democracy needs less critical thought and more citizens whose only role is to consume, well-known author Lewis Lapham writes:

The quickening construction of Santa's workshops outside the walls of government and the academy resulted in the increased production of pamphlets, histories, monographs and background briefings intended to bring about the ruin of the liberal idea in all its institutionalized forms - the demonization of the liberal press, the disparagement of liberal sentiment, the destruction of liberal education - and by the time Ronald Reagan arrived in triumph at the White House in 1980 the assembly lines were operating at full capacity. [11]

Any attempt to understand and engage the current right-wing assault on all vestiges of the social contract, the social state and democracy itself will

have to begin with challenging this massive infrastructure, which functions as one of the most powerful teaching machines we have seen in the United States, a teaching machine that produces a culture that is increasingly poisonous and detrimental not just to liberalism, but to the formative culture that makes an aspiring democracy possible. This presence of this ideological infrastructure extending from the media to other sites of popular education suggests the need for a new kind of debate, one that is not limited to isolated issues such as health care, but is more broad-based and fundamental, a debate about how power, inequality and money constrict the educational, economic and political conditions that make democracy possible. The screaming harpies and mindless public relations "intellectuals" that dominate the media today are not the problem; it is the conditions that give rise to the institutions that put them in place, finance them and drown out other voices. What must be clear is that this threat to creating a critically informed citizenry is not merely a crisis of communication and language, but about the ways in which money and power create the educational conditions that make a mockery out of debate while hijacking any vestige of democracy.

Notes:

[1] Paul Krugman, "All the President's Zombies," *The New York Times* (August 24, 2009), p. A17.

[2] Lewis F. Powell Jr., "The Powell Memo," *ReclaimDemocracy.org* (August 23, 1971), available online at http://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate_accountability/powell_memo_lewis.html.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See Michael P. Crozier, Samuel J. Huntington and J. Watanuki, "The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission" (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

[6] Powell, "The Powell Memo."

[7] Lewis H. Lapham, "Tentacles of Rage - The Republican Propaganda Mill, a Brief History," *Harper's Magazine* (September 2004), p. 32.

[8] Dave Johnson, "Who's Behind the Attack on Liberal Professors?" History News Network, (February 10, 2005), available online at <http://hnn.us/articles/printfriendly/1244.html>.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Alan Jones, "Connecting the Dots," Inside Higher Ed (June 16, 2006), available online at <http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/06/16/jones>.

[11] Lapham, "Tentacles of Rage," p. 38.

Henry A. Giroux holds the Global TV Network chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Canada. Related work: Henry A. Giroux, "The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence" (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). His most recent books include "Take Back Higher Education" (co-authored with Susan Searls Giroux, 2006), "The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex" (2007) and "Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed" (2008). His newest book, "Youth in a Suspect Society: Beyond the Politics of Disposability," will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2009. Henry A. Giroux's latest book, "Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?," has just been published by Palgrave Macmillan.